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SE Valley sets freeway milestones

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It was a historic 2006 of sorts for Southeast Valley commuters and transportation officials.

The year brought the longest stretch of Valley freeway ever to open at one time, when the Santan Freeway section of Loop 202 was unveiled in full to drivers in June.

It meant 12 fresh miles of freeway and connecting 25 miles of Loop 202 south of U.S. 60, linking southeast Mesa, Gilbert and Chandler with Phoenix and beyond.

In addition, two more ramps from the towering U.S. 60-Loop 202 interchange in east Mesa opened to traffic in November. And this year, Loop 202 between Van Buren Street and Alma School Road received rubberized asphalt, bringing the noise-reducing surface to Tempe and Mesa.

"It really is a culmination of 20-some years of planning and working at it," said Eric Anderson, transportation director for the Maricopa Association of Governments, the region's planning body.

State lawmakers and the governor also set aside \$300 million statewide to accelerate freeway projects, some of which are in the Southeast Valley.

Next year, drivers will have more highly anticipated presents to unwrap in the form of new or wider freeways. The projects, all of which are destined for summer 2007 completions and total more than \$210 million, include:

- A wider Superstition Freeway stretch of U.S. 60 between Gilbert and Power roads. The freeway's capacity will be doubled to six lanes in each direction and will include rubberized asphalt and noise barriers.
- Finishing the \$67.4 million section of Loop 202 between University Drive and Southern Avenue in north Mesa. It will feature six lanes and interchanges at University Drive and Broadway Road. It's the second-to-last piece of the Red Mountain Freeway puzzle. The final section, between Power Road and University Drive, is targeted for a 2008 opening.
- Completing the massive Southeast Valley freeway stack known as the

SuperRedTan, where U.S. 60 and Loop 202 converge. A couple connector ramps on the \$71.4 million interchange will open. Other project particulars include widening of U.S. 60 between Power and Crismon roads and completing Loop 202 from Baseline Road north to Southern Avenue.

Officials see the freeway improvement as progress in the region's ongoing battle against congestion, even as some people call for more to be done.

"I'm optimistic there will be additional steps in the right direction to follow up on this year's project accelerations," Arizona Department of Transportation Director Victor Mendez said.

New and wider freeways also will provide options for drivers in areas that have lacked freeway access, officials say. Anderson, of MAG, cited northeast Mesa as an example and said that drivers may see less traffic on U.S. 60 when more of Loop 202 opens in that area.

Surface street congestion also is expected to decrease somewhat over the next few years.

"Every improvement we make benefits the regional system to some extent," Anderson said.

Projects that will get started next year include:

- Adding carpool lanes to Loop 101 between Princess Drive and (Red Mountain) Loop 202 in Tempe.
- Buying right of way for the future Williams Gateway Freeway in southeast Mesa near Williams Gateway Airport. It'll jut off Loop 202 and run five miles east to Meridian Road. Construction is still at least 10 years away.
- Design of carpool lanes for Loop 101 between Baseline Road in Mesa and Loop 202 in Chandler.

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